

JUST THE FACTS

PRESCRIPTION AND OVER-THE-COUNTER DRUGS

AN EDUCATIONAL FACT SHEET FROM
THE FLORIDA ALCOHOL & DRUG ABUSE ASSOCIATION

Over \$44 billion in prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs are produced each year in the United States. Although most people use these medications properly, a significant number do not. They might take them without a doctor's prescription, use more than prescribed, or take them for reasons other than prescribed.

Over 24 million people over the age of 12 reported having used one or more psychoactive drugs (sedatives, stimulants and analgesics, both prescribed and OTC) for nonmedical purposes at some time in their lives. Stimulants and analgesics were the most widely used drug of abuse that fit this category. Psychoactive drugs are abused because they directly affect the brain and central nervous system (CNS), producing the desired effects.

The elderly are at the greatest risk for misuse of medications because they often use many different types of medications to treat one or more illnesses. Though this group comprises approximately 11 percent of the population, they consume nearly one half of the prescription drugs sold each year.

COMMON MEDICATIONS, THEIR USES AND EFFECTS

STIMULANTS

Amphetamines and caffeine are stimulants used primarily to delay the onset of mental and physical fatigue and to treat problems such as hyperactivity in children. Students studying long hours for exams, athletes who feel the drugs will improve their performance and workers who want to stay awake on the job often use stimulants.

These drug compounds are often found in diet pills which, if used improperly, can lead to *anorexia nervosa*. Anorexia nervosa is a pathological loss of appetite thought to be psychological in origin that is manifested in extreme dieting and excessive thinness. Caffeine is also found in many beverages, pain medications and allergy and cold remedies. Unusually high doses or excessive use of stimulants over long periods of time can lead to anxiety, hallucinations, severe depression or physical and psychological dependence. From a strong stimulant such as cocaine to nicotine in cigarettes and caffeine in coffee and cola drinks, stimulants are an intimate part of our lives.

ANALGESICS

Some of the most widely used analgesics, available in both prescription and over-the-counter forms, include:

- Aspirin: The most common analgesic used today to treat fever, arthritis and pain;

possible side effects can include nausea, heartburn or the development of bleeding ulcers.

Aspirin should be taken with plenty of water or food to prevent stomach upset. Reye's syndrome may develop if aspirin is given to children with the flu or chicken pox. This disease is characterized by vomiting, swelling of the brain and liver and difficulty with mental functioning, and can often lead to death. People with liver damage should also avoid using aspirin.

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol): Used to treat aches, pains and fevers and is generally free from side effects. Large doses or overuse of this drug may cause rashes, fevers or changes in blood composition. People with kidney or liver problems should consult a doctor before using acetaminophen.
- Ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil, Nuprin): Used to relieve pain associated with arthritis, menstrual cramping and discomfort, fever and muscle strains. Possible side effects might include upset stomach, dizziness, drowsiness, headache or ringing in the ears. Overuse of this drug may lead to confusion, tingling in hands and feet, and vomiting.
- Narcotic Analgesics: Prescription medications such as Codeine, Morphine, Demerol, Dilaudid, Darvocet, Percodan and Percocet. They are widely used non-medically for their psychoactive effects and may be the most abused prescription medications. They should never be used in combination with alcohol or sedatives. Excessive use can cause respiratory arrest, shock, cardiac arrest, hallucinations, lack of coordination and rapid heartbeat.

Analgesic users should be aware of any allergies they may have to these drugs and use them according to label directions.

ANTIDEPRESSANTS

These are prescription medications used to treat depression, a disease affecting approximately 10% of the U.S. population. Some of the original drugs of this group are Nardil, Tofranil and Elavil. Although not technically an antidepressant, lithium, which is used to treat manic depression, is often included in this group. The side effects of prolonged and excessive use of these drugs are excessive urination or thirst, diarrhea, vomiting, drowsiness, dizziness or muscle weakness. Some newer antidepressants that show great promise in treating this disease are Wellbutrin, Prozac, Zoloft, Effexor and Serzone. The incidence of side effects with these seem to be less than with the previously used medications.

SEDATIVE-HYPNOTICS AND TRANQUILIZERS

Benzodiazepines are the most widely prescribed tranquilizers and sleep-inducing medications. They are also the most abused by the public. Drugs used to treat anxiety and tension are Valium, Xanax, Ativan and

Tranxene. Drugs used for sleeping are Dalmane, Resotril and Halcion. Possible side effects include drowsiness, light-headedness and poor coordination. When the elderly use sleep-inducing benzodiazepines, the possibility of "morning-after hangover syndrome" is great. Overuse of these drugs can lead to sleeplessness, respiratory difficulties, coma and even death.

BARBITURATES

Barbiturates are less commonly prescribed medications used to treat anxiety and insomnia. If improperly used, these drugs can cause an individual to feel depressed or experience respiratory difficulties. Some examples are Phenobarbital, Seconal, Nembutal and Theopental. Non-barbiturates include Doriden, Placidyl and Chloral Hydrate.

COUGH AND COLD PREPARATIONS

Colds are caused by viruses and typically last 7 to 10 days. Most cold preparations are designed to treat specific cold symptoms and provide temporary relief from discomfort. These medicines often contain pain relievers, decongestants, antihistamines and cough suppressants. Caution should be used when taking them, as they often cause drowsiness or excitability. Most widely used cold remedies include the following:

- ❑ Antihistamines and Decongestants: Typically used to relieve itchy, watery eyes and to reduce congestion due to allergies, colds and flu. They can also cause excitability or drowsiness. Activities such as driving that require mental alertness should be avoided when taking these drugs. OTC preparations containing antihistamines are often taken in excessive quantities to produce a high such as that experienced when abusing narcotics and sedatives.
- ❑ Antitussives and Expectorants: Antitussives are cough suppressants used to treat painful, persistent coughs. Expectorants are used to help clear mucous from the respiratory system. Both medications may contain alcohol and some may contain narcotics, such as codeine, to relieve pain and induce sleep. Some may be addictive. Young people may abuse these medications for the effects derived from alcohol use, as the alcohol content in some OTC preparations may be as high as 40 percent. These medications should not be taken beyond the recommended number of days or in greater doses than indicated on the label or by a doctor. Taking these medications for prolonged periods of time may cover up other illnesses or health problems. A doctor should be notified in case of continued problems or new symptoms.
- ❑ Laxatives: Among the most widely misused and abused OTC medications. This is particularly true among the elderly and is due to misunderstanding of normal bowel function. Use of laxatives should be restricted to short-term use for constipation, since chronic use leads to dependency. This is primarily true of saline-type (Magnesium Citrate, Fleet Enema), stimulant-type (Ex-lax, Dulcolax), lubricants (Mineral Oil) and stool softeners (Colace). The last two types are useful with those who should not strain during defecation, such as heart patients, but may rapidly cause a laxative-dependant condition. Laxative Abuse Syndrome (LAS) may lead to fluid and electrolyte imbalances as well as vitamin and

mineral deficiencies. The following guidelines when using laxatives are useful and may prevent their abuse: proper dietary fiber intake, adequate fluid intake and proper exercise. Laxative users should remember that these drugs are only a temporary measure and should restrict intake to a one week period unless specifically advised otherwise by their physician.

MISUSE AND DEPENDENCE

Misuse of prescription and OTC drugs can often lead to psychological and physical dependence. People may use increased amounts to insure a sense of well-being, to treat unrelated illnesses or health problems or for nonmedical purposes.

Many medications contain alcohol and narcotics such as codeine, which can be addictive and life-threatening. Use of alcohol, a depressant, with some prescription and OTC drugs may inhibit or increase the drug's effectiveness as well as cause depression, drowsiness, confusion, and loss of coordination. Combining OTC drugs with some prescription drugs can cause the same, or more harmful, types of reactions.

PREVENTING DRUG MISUSE

Both prescription and OTC medications can be very helpful in the treatment of health problems and injuries. The following are some points to remember about taking medication properly and preventing medication misuse, harmful reactions or drug interactions:

- ❑ Ask your doctor or read the OTC label information about the effects and/or side effects of drugs you take
- ❑ Take medications according to recommended dose and length of time
- ❑ Notify your doctor of any reactions to medications
- ❑ Dispose of any leftover prescription medications following the treatment of your illness or injury after checking with your doctor
- ❑ Inform your doctor of all medications you are currently taking, the dosages, and any allergies you may have to medications
- ❑ Do not use medications (prescription or OTC) to treat unrelated illnesses, pains, or injuries
- ❑ Discuss any special precautions you may need to take with use of medications. Ask if there are any problems with combining them with certain foods, alcohol, or other prescription or OTC medicines
- ❑ If you are pregnant, always consult your doctor before taking any type of prescription or OTC medication
- ❑ Never share your prescription medication
- ❑ If you are unsure of the effects of a medication, ask your doctor or pharmacist to explain them

Written in part by
Marvin A. Friedman, PD, Rph, CAAP



Funds for this document are provided by the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program, Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services; and the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Program Office, contract #MH614.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION CALL THE FLORIDA ALCOHOL & DRUG ABUSE ASSOCIATION RESOURCE CENTER
1030 EAST LAFAYETTE STREET, SUITE 100, TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA 32301 TEL: (904) 878-2196**